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The Historical Monograph

**SUGGESTIONS FOR THE
Preparation of Historical Monographs**

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The writer is convinced that undergraduates in beginning the study of History should receive definite instruction in historical methods. Obviously, it is important that they should be kept from forming faulty habits of work which they almost inevitably do unless carefully guided. Only comparatively few of the total number of college students who select work in History continue it until they enter any really advanced course where time can well be spared to emphasize research processes. Various expedients have been tried by conscientious instructors to meet this situation. The writer has made use of lectures, has posted instructions, has held conferences, and has referred students to approved works dealing with this subject; but no method seems to yield such results as the placing of a very brief manual of instructions in the hands of *every* undergraduate as soon as he takes up a course in History. As he advances in his work he will then be able profitably to make use of the more or less elaborate treatises on historical method. The suggestions that follow have come from various sources and are among those given to beginners by many of the leading contributors to the field of History.



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The Historical Monograph

WHAT IS AN HISTORICAL MONOGRAPH?

Every student who is doing work in the field of History should have some experience in the preparation of so-called historical monographs. The monograph is a special study which is limited to a careful consideration of some one subject. It should be critical in nature and should sum up the latest investigations that have been made relative to the subject in hand. Therefore, to be of value, the monograph as far as possible should avoid the reiteration of commonplace, well-accepted facts, and should comprehend a discussion of points that are in dispute. It should be the endeavor of each writer of a monograph to present the truth of the past just a little more clearly than has previously been done; at least the production should represent the matured viewpoint of the writer.

GENERAL PROCESSES OF INVESTIGATION

After selecting the subject, a general article covering the same should be read, if available, and a digest made of the leading points. Much assistance can be gained from such a publication as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in laying the foundations for an investigation. Certain phases of the subject will now demand attention and it is important that some sort of an outline be prepared to guide one in the quest for further information. Unless this is done the student is apt to spend much time in collecting facts that will be of little assistance to him when the actual writing of the study begins. Some such process as the following can be used in evolving a monograph:

Suppose one desires to prepare a scholarly paper upon *President Andrew Johnson*. As there is no standard life of Johnson which could give a suitable background, it will be necessary in laying a foundation for investigation to use either some popular work or an encyclopaedia article, or

to refer to such an author as Rhodes, who in his *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850* gives a sketch of Johnson's life, while at the same time treating quite fully the events of his presidency. In reading Rhodes's account certain statements will attract the attention; among them, charges that Johnson was raised in the midst of a low environment, that he was a man of intemperate habits, that in various other ways he was utterly unqualified for the high office of President, that by his actions he disgraced this post of honor, and that had Lincoln lived he would probably have been able to save the Nation from much of the misery of the Reconstruction period—something that Johnson could not do.

Naturally enough, the question arises whether Rhodes is correct or is simply deeply prejudiced in his statements. The only way to decide will be through the collection of as much first class evidence as possible. This evidence will be used to clarify the following aspects of Johnson's life: *His Early Training, Habits and Personality, Preparation for the Presidency, Mistakes as President, and The Reconstruction of the South.*

The most valuable is contemporary evidence. But in this case it is extremely conflicting; for writers in those days were intensely partisan in their views of men and events. As far as possible the credibility of each witness for and against Johnson must be tested. Take as an example *The Diary of Gideon Welles*, which exhaustively deals with Johnson's administration. The following questions among others must be answered before one is prepared to decide how far Welles may be relied upon as a witness: Who was the man? What were his qualifications and opportunities to write with accuracy? Did he prepare his *Diary* with some special motive in mind? Was it actually written from day to day? Was he biased in his views? In deciding these points there must be employed the internal evidence which the *Diary* contains and the external evidence drawn from various sources relative to Welles himself.

By this process of examining sharply each source of information the investigator will be able to do a discrim-

ating piece of work, provided that his search for evidence is sufficiently exhaustive.

SOURCES

The next thing to be settled after the preliminary work has been done is whether or not additional light can be gained upon certain special phases that have attracted the attention of the investigator. The sources of the desired information are of three classes:

a. Original sources. These consist of such materials as original legal documents, contemporaneous accounts left in letters or in newspapers, official journals, and relics of various kinds.

b. Special works. These are studies pertaining to the field in which the subject lies, written by those who are recognized authorities.

c. General works. General histories by approved writers make up this class.

Note. Most school manuals, popular accounts and unsigned articles found in the majority of publications should be used with great caution and seldom quoted as authority for any statement.

The material in class *a* is intrinsically as a body more valuable as authority than that in the other two classes. However, it is the most difficult to use. The material in this class is not all of the same value; this applies as well to the material that belongs to the other two classes. Again, the material in class *b* is apt to be more valuable than that in class *c*. To illustrate: An exact copy of the Declaration of Independence which is a so-called original source is the best authority as to the contents of this document. However, it is not easily understood in all its phases when studied without the aid of some critical commentary. Friedenwald's scholarly book on the Declaration of Independence, which belongs to the class of special works, gives great assistance in interpreting this document and in many ways is more valuable as an authority than Fiske's *History of the American Revolution*, which is a general work dealing with this period of American History and as such is worth consulting. Again, among original sources, *The*

Secret Journals of the Second Continental Congress are obviously more valuable than the files of *The Connecticut Gazette* of the year 1776 in supplying information relative to the steps taken by Congress in the passage of the Declaration. While the *Gazette* will furnish some interesting information, for many reasons that will become apparent to the student, it is more liable to contain misstatements than the *Journals* which were officially published. In case of conflicting statements between these two sources, the presumption must always be in favor of the correctness of the latter.

Among the multitude of secondary works of an historical nature the writer of a monograph is called upon to exercise great discrimination in selecting those that are really contributions to his subject. Out of the vast quantity that have been published comparatively few are worthy of a scholar's consideration. The following reasons are generally assigned to account for this fact: In the first place, writings are apt to be based upon insufficient data. Too many are satisfied to make sweeping generalizations without any attempt to prove them. As one scholar has pointed out, people have a fatal tendency "to be very sure of things about which they know nothing." Secondly, they do not often represent the results of original research. It takes time and patience to go to the bottom of things through first-hand investigation, and so secondary sources alone are relied upon. Thirdly, they are liable to be prejudiced accounts. Few writers are disposed to maintain a judicial attitude of mind until the investigation is finished and, then only, arrive at definite conclusions. The ardent champion of certain opinions is in danger of falling victim to one of two temptations: either the willful suppression of evidence that does not harmonize with his notions, or the twisting of it in such a fashion that it appears to help prove his point. In each case there is intellectual dishonesty and the work will lack authority. It, therefore, behooves one to exercise great caution in deciding how far it is safe to place reliance upon the statements found in any published work. This comes as a challenge to one's highest capacity for discrimination.

THE BIBLIOGRAPHY

A list of books and other sources that have been useful in the working up of the monograph should accompany it. This bibliography is always strengthened if a word of comment is added to each listed authority. The following examples will illustrate this:

GENERAL WORKS.

George Bancroft. A History of the United States (last edition, 6 vols., 1883-1885). Strongly prejudiced against the British but accurate in statement.

Sir George Otto Trevelyan. The American Revolution, in three volumes. Published in 1903. The author takes the American and English Whig point of view. The best piece of literature on the subject.

THE TAKING OF NOTES

No one should attempt to write a scholarly historical paper without first gathering notes upon the subject from the available authorities. It is recommended that these notes be taken on loose 5 x 8 sheets or on sheets of some other standard filing size. For general convenience in use and filing, each sheet should have the subject under investigation written at the top. There should also be a sub-head. Suppose the subject to be *The Origin of the Declaration of Independence*, then one of the sub-heads used might be *Thomas Paine and the Declaration*.

These notes should be literal quotations from the authorities consulted. Let there be a sheet for each extract whether long or short. The author, title, volume and page should appear on each sheet, either along the left-hand margin or at the bottom. Needless to say, a pen or indelible pencil should be employed.

USE OF THE NOTES

When one has finished the task of taking notes there comes the problem of making proper use of them. The reason for having each on a separate sheet becomes

apparent as one surveys the confused pile, drawn from different sources. The reason also for the sub-headings is now evident. For the notes with the same sub-heads are assembled together and soon the whole body of them as by magic has become at last really serviceable. Such a system is a great time-saver when it comes to the mastery of these extracts, which is the next step in the preparation of the monograph. In reading them over and comparing them, too much attention cannot be paid to conflicting statements. After using them, the notes can be filed away in a standard filing case.

THE WRITING OF THE MONOGRAPH

In writing the paper do not give simply a mass of facts. Deal with those aspects of the subject that have most vitally influenced succeeding events. This applies equally to a man's life and to a public issue. Pertinent questions should be raised and as far as possible answered with reference to problems that are connected with the topic that is being treated. In fact, in beginning the investigation one should formulate these problems that are to be solved, if possible. For instance, in preparing a monograph on *Washington as President* it would be interesting to attempt to determine just how far he was under the influence of Hamilton and why he tended to favor the English rather than the French.

Whenever reliable authorities differ on any important point this should be indicated. A discussion of conflicting evidence will be the most valuable feature of an historical monograph. It should possess clearness and correct emphasis, and great care should be used that there is a logical development of ideas. It should not be a mere mass of quotations, but on the other hand should reflect the writer's ideas and viewpoint. Above everything else, it should be accurate in every detail.

USE OF THE FOOTNOTE

Footnotes are used for various purposes. For instance, whenever an important or disputed statement is made or a literal quotation is used, authority should be furnished for

these in footnotes. Explanatory and additional illustrative material is often found among the footnotes of well-written monographs. Reference to each footnote should be made in the body of the paper by means of a small figure placed at the end of the statement in question. Footnotes should as a rule appear somewhat as follows:

(7) *See Burgess, Civil War and Constitution, II., 120.*
or

(15) *The best discussion of this point is in Gibbon.*
See Vol. VI., pp. 240-250. or

(8) *It should be borne in mind that Clarendon's description of Cromwell is radically different from that given by either Gardiner or Firth.*

THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF ORIGINALITY

An instructor in History would fail in his duty to his students if he neglected to charge them never to forget that plagiarism is held among writers to be nothing less than a crime. A true student will certainly take pride in having the mark of his individuality appear in every sentence of the paper that comes from his work-shop and bears his name. He will see that each piece of work represents his finest power of achievement.

THE HISTORICAL SPIRIT

It is fatal to attempt to write acceptable history under the impulse of strong personal, family, national, racial or religious prejudices. While the writer may well have deep convictions he should guard lest these lead him to torture and distort the evidence which he has succeeded in accumulating. It should never be forgotten that there is nothing more sacred than truth, and that to uncover the truth and proclaim it irrespective of preconceptions should be the lofty mission of every investigator. Men who distort facts in no matter how good a cause so as to picture the past as they would personally like to have it appear are not writing history but are defeating the cause of truth. Intellectual honesty is a priceless gift—cultivate it.

BOOKS ON HISTORICAL METHOD AND EVIDENCE

The following books on historical method and evidence are especially recommended to students interested in research:

Fling, F. M. Outline of Historical Method. 1899. Ainsworth.

George, H. B. Historical Evidence. 1909. Clarendon Press.

Langlois, C. V., and Signobos, C. Introduction to the Study of History. 1902. Holt.

Vincent, J. M. Historical Research: an Outline of Theory and Practice. 1911. Holt.

Two works intended for advanced students should be mentioned, *Bernheim's Lehrbuch der Historischen Methode* and *Wolf's Einführung in das Studium der Neuere Geschichte*, neither of which have up to date been translated into English.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



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